



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**Connecticut General Assembly
Children's Committee
Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker
February 21, 2023**

Good morning, Representative Linehan, Senator Maher, Representative Dauphinais, Senator Seminara, and members of the Children's Committee. I am Charlene Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of the Department of Education (department). I am sorry that I am unable to join you today, but I would like to offer you the following written testimony, and I would be happy to meet with you if you would like to discuss this matter further.

SB 2, An Act Concerning the Mental, Physical, and Emotional Wellness of Children

The department is supportive of the work of this Committee and the Senate Democrats pertaining to this proposal. Specifically, Section 8, which allows service workers, including school food service staff and other hourly workers, to take a mental health wellness day to attend to their emotional and psychological needs; and in principle, Section 10 which supports Medicaid reimbursement for suicide risk assessments and other mental health evaluations and services provided at a school-based health center or public school. Section 17 requires the department to hire one full-time employee who will award a grant to and collaborate with a nonprofit organization that specializes in identifying and providing services for at-risk teenage students who are experiencing depression, anxiety, substance abuse, trauma and conflict-related stresses, for the purpose of training school behavioral health providers to be able to identify and provide services for such at-risk teenage students. We fully embrace this charge, however we would need additional funds to hire the full time employee. We also believe that in Section 19, the sum of 15 thousand dollars will likely be insufficient in attracting a nonprofit to partner with the department in this work and that funding for this purpose is not currently within SDE's budget. With that said, again, we are very supportive of the work and look forward to continuing the conversation.

SB 1046, An Act Concerning the Reduction of Food Waste in Schools

The department recognizes the value in composting as both a practical and education initiative, but we would like to raise concerns regarding this mandate for certain local and regional boards of education in the composting of source-separated organic materials. We are concerned about a potential significant cost for schools to separate and contract with a hauler to pick up and deliver the waste as needed. Additionally, it is unclear if the existing DEEP Food Waste Composting Facilities have the capacity to accept this additional waste from schools. We also believe that this will not have the intended impact on reducing food waste relative to the focused need to address the nutritional health of our students. It is more likely that this will increase food waste, especially fruits and vegetables, as students instead of consuming them, will want to support the composting program by adding to its volume. Students only benefit from healthy foods if they consume them. Section 3 requires the department to develop guidelines concerning the implementation of a composting station program. Information and resources already exist

pertaining to this topic, so the department would be more than happy to provide such resources to school districts without having to reinvent the wheel.

SB 6717, An Act Concerning Guidelines and Best Practices for School Food Service Employees

However well intentioned, the department cannot support this proposal. According to The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), eating disorders are serious but treatable mental and physical illnesses that can affect people of all demographics and are widely misunderstood illnesses. Food service staff are not trained, professional, school mental health workers, and do not know what is happening in the student's life outside of the cafeteria. It takes specific training and expertise to address eating disorders and having no or minimal experience can be dangerous for the student. Lunch waves are 20 – 30 minutes long and food service staff interact for only a few seconds with each child, and are focused on efficient operations required in the implementation of the Federal meals program. Teachers and other school staff interact and have relationships with students that allow them to understand the student's issues and identify supports and internal and external teams to support positive outcomes. It is more beneficial to the student, to receive those supports from trained staff. Thank you for taking that into consideration moving forward.